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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes an integrative approach for teaching English as a second language to students in Hong Kong to develop their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in English to meet the challenge of an English curriculum. The integrative approach provides an authentic language environment for learners to develop language skills in a meaningful context by building on learners' prior knowledge on interesting and relevant topics. The approach introduces grammar rules through topical discourse, introducing different language functions (e.g., persuasive discourse, cause-and-effect sentence structure, verb tense). The "authentic" learning environment is characterized by the communicative nature of teacher-student and student-student interactions. Specific language skills are taught by engaging language learners in meaning-making strategies such as cooperative work, brainstorming, hands-on experience, problem-solving tasks, and display of visual objects, using only the target language. This approach is in contrast to Hong Kong's conventional language teaching method, in which focus is on memorization and routine practice. The teacher is crucial in creating an authentic learning environment, modeling language use rather than correcting errors, and avoiding Chinese for classroom translation. The language teaching-learning cycle has four stages: building topical knowledge; modeling the genre under focus; joint construction of the genre; and independent construction of the genre. Contains 11 references. (MSE)

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AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: THE HONG KONG CASE

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The Need for an Integrative Approach

Chinese and English are the official languages in Hong Kong. The majority of the people speak Chinese in daily communication. The education system in Hong Kong is intended to produce bilingual individuals, who can speak, read, and write interchangeably in two languages. Students in Hong Kong are exposed to English as early as kindergarten. In elementary schools, English is taught as a subject in the curriculum. When students transit from elementary schools to English secondary schools, schools adopt English textbooks in all subjects except Chinese Language Arts and Chinese History. Many students have difficulties adjusting to the textbooks that are written in English. Students in Hong Kong are instructed with the grammatical rules in a sequential order, and learning is reinforced through massive practice in workbooks. The formulaic practice of one single grammar rule at a time does not seem to adequately equip students with the language skills needed to understand the academic concepts that are presented in English. In fact, the lack of English skills seems to be a major obstacle to students' understanding of the learning materials and to the schools in reaching their goal of training bilingual individuals. This phenomenon calls for educators to develop alternative second-language teaching approaches to improve the current situation.

The purpose of this paper is to propose an integrative approach for teaching English as a second language to students in Hong Kong to develop their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in English to meet the challenge of an English curriculum.

Theories of First Language Acquisition

Human beings' ability to master a first language has been explained through behaviorist, innatist, and interactionist theories (Lightbown & Spada, 1993). The behaviorist theory claims that children learn language by imitating what they hear. Imitation is a form of practice, and continuous practice can become a habit, which forms the basis for learning a new language. Challenging the imitation explanation, Chomsky proposes that human beings possess the innate ability to learn a language. He argues that children can produce words and sentences that they have never heard before, which can not have been the result of imitation. The innatist theory explains how children acquire complex grammar. Finally, the interactionists acknowledge the biological aspects of language learning, but also believe that children learn a language through interacting with others. Adults and caretakers usually provide a structured language environment when interacting with children, which enables children to learn the pragmatic use of language. Over the past few decades, the behaviorist explanation has been proven to be insufficient to explain how language is learned, but it has a long history of governing second language teaching approaches (Diaz-Rico, 1995).

Overview of Second Language Teaching Approaches

Up until the mid-twentieth century, grammar translation was the most popular foreign-language instruction method in the Western world (Richard-Amato, 1988). Students in foreign language classes mainly focused on learning the rules of grammar and translating the text. In the 1960's, the behaviorist theory became the predominant learning theory. It focused on rote memorization, drill and practice, and accuracy in grammar and

language production. This theory assumes that learners are blank slates; thus teachers have to fill them with abundant information (Diaz-Rico, 1995). In 1970's, the cognitive theory became popular. It focused on the constructing of meaning through meaningful activities and interaction. The strength of this theory is in providing meaningful learning experiences in an understandable fashion through discussing familiar topics or experiences that occur in real life situations. Its teaching philosophy is supported by the observation of how children learn to speak their first language. No one forces them to speak, write or even learn about the grammatical rules. It is usually after children have grasped the meaning of the language that they learn to read and write the language that is making sense to them. Contrary to the cognitive theory, the second language teaching approaches in Hong Kong are primarily based on the behaviorist theory.

Conceptual Framework of the Integrative Approach

The integrative approach is intended to provide an authentic language environment for learners to develop listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in a meaningful context. One of the functions of language is to fulfill social purposes. In a language classroom, teachers can create an authentic environment for social interaction among learners (Lightbown & Spada, 1993; Long & Porter, 1985). The topics and learning activities must be relevant and interesting to the learners. The learning of grammatical rules is embedded in communicative activities. Contrary to the behaviorist assumption of the learner as a blank slate, the integrative approach builds new learning upon students' prior knowledge. It treats learners as individual thinkers, capable of performing

challenging tasks. This approach focuses on learning as a process in which learners will be provided with ample opportunities to understand and practice concepts that are presented to them. Errors are treated as part of the learner's learning process. Teachers provide a low-anxiety environment that allows learners to take risks. Corrections are made through modeling from teachers or peers (Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Pica, 1994).

Learning Grammar in a Meaningful Context

Research has shown that just teaching grammar in isolation is not an effective way of teaching language (Lightbown, 1992; Long & Porter, 1985). The grammatical syllabus approach fails to provide the practical communicative aspect of learning a second language. Very often students in traditional grammar-approach classrooms find that what they have learned in the language classroom cannot apply to real life conversations. The focus on grammar ignores the learning of content in meaningful context and the appropriate use of language. Contrary to the study of grammatical rules, verbal or written communication in real situations requires the use of a wide range of language forms. When students are taught only one grammatical rule at a time, they may have difficulties in applying syntax, semantics, and pragmatics interactively (Krashen, 1985; Lightbown, 1992). In turn, they may not feel confident in making the choice to function in their second language.

Unlike traditional teaching, which focuses on studying one single grammatical rule at a time, the integrative approach introduces grammatical rules through meaningful learning in which learners are communicating about the focus topic, such as telling a friend about the harmful effects of smoking. This language task exposes students to a variety of

language functions such as persuasive language discourse, cause-and-effect sentence structure, past tense to indicate research evidence on smoking, and future tense to discuss harmful effects. The rationale is for learners first to be familiar with the topics of their current learning, then be exposed to models of appropriate language use, then to make sense and produce language that is relevant to the context, and finally to learn the rules of language based on what they have produced.

Create an Authentic Learning Environment

An authentic environment can be a springboard for meaning-based second language learning. The term "authentic" is apply to learning situations that are similar to real life situations. The authentic environment is characterized by the communicative nature of interactions between teacher and student, and between student and student. These interactions can enable students to make sense of what they are currently learning, based on their prior knowledge. Information is first presented as a whole, and then specific language skills are taught in a meaningful context. An authentic environment engages learners in meaning-making strategies such as cooperative group work, brainstorming, hands-on experiences, problem solving tasks, and display of visual objects (Swain, 1985). In this approach, teachers do not use the students' first language for translation purposes. According to Krashen (1985), when teachers use the primary language for translation, learners most likely will tune out the second language.

In a typical composition class in Hong Kong, the teacher writes down the topic on the board, asks students if they understand the topic and then the students are left alone with the writing process. Many students have a difficult time coming up with ideas to

fully develop the content of their writing assignments. This could be a result of the limited guidance from teacher and limited previous opportunities for students to practice writing for a variety of purposes. The writing exercises that students are exposed to involve predominantly answering questions from the readings and producing formulaic responses from the workbooks. Most assignments do not require critical thinking skills or thorough understanding of the materials. Learners can copy the exact answers from the text or produce sentences using the sample language formulas.

Many students encounter writer's block in composition classes for various reasons. The most prominent ones are a lack of knowledge on the topic being written about, and the lack of specific skills in organizing and presenting information. Many learners have a high anxiety level due to the fear of the red correction marks on the returned paper. Many times, students will alter the content of the sentences because they cannot find the word that has the direct translation. They also feel pressured to complete the essay before the bell rings, even while concerning themselves with grammatical rules, the content, the style, and the words that can express their thoughts. The concern for the grammatical correctness, the time, and the limited vocabulary in the second language reduces the overall quality of the essay.

In English classrooms in Hong Kong, building an authentic environment means shifting the focus from memorization and routine practice to understanding and expressing creative thoughts. When introducing a new story, teachers can lead a discussion on similar experiences that have happened to the students. Vocabulary words can be incorporated through class discussion. Predictions can be made through meaningful

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discussions which can guide learners to a better understanding of the text. Learners are provided with opportunities to develop oral fluency in their second language through structured interaction among students, and between teachers and students.

In addition to the practices that are available in the textbooks or workbooks, teachers can further develop students' verbal and written skills by asking them to re-create a new version based on what students have learned from the literature or their interpretation of the text. Students then have to present their new version to the class. The re-creation can take place in many forms such as skit, poem, story, letter, biography, picture with illustrations, etc. The product demonstrates not only that students understand the story, but also that they have the ability to take what they have learned and apply it in a new context. This example illustrates that an authentic learning environment can help second-language learners to develop language skills in a balanced manner.

Roles of Teachers

Teachers play a crucial role in creating an authentic learning environment that is relevant and interesting to the learners. Contrary to the traditional idea of treating learners as blank slates, the integrative approach suggests that teachers allow students to explore and generate new knowledge during the learning process. This can be accomplished through an interactive learning environment. It is characterized by divergent questioning techniques, authentic problem solving tasks, and learners' verbal and written sharing of thoughts. When learners have successful experiences in expressing themselves, they have not only accomplished the communicative function, but have also gained confidence in using the second language.

Another role for teachers is to create a positive learning environment in which learners' errors are accepted as part of the learning process. Teachers can encourage learners to use the second language to communicate with their peers in class through the use of group work. Instead of overt concern about students' language error, teachers can model the correct language use. Teachers can make an effort to acknowledge students' product by displaying students' work publicly or producing class books.

In terms of language use, teachers need to be cautious of using Chinese for translation purposes. Teachers can provide comprehensible input to assist students in comprehending the learning materials. Techniques that would make input comprehensible include visuals (photos, pictures, charts, graphs, demonstration), hands-on activities, frequent comprehension check, activating prior knowledge, body language, cooperative groups, paraphrase, etc. As noted above, Krashen (1985) states that second language learners often tune out the second language when they know the teacher will repeat the same information in the primary language. In this case, it will be more effective to utilize primary language for previewing or reviewing information (Lessow-Hurley, 1990). Teachers can also provide a rich language repertoire by modeling a variety of language uses.

Instructional Sequence

Activating prior knowledge.

Contrary to the behaviorist theory and teacher-centered classrooms, which view teachers and textbooks as the main sources of knowledge, and learners as passive consumers of what is presented to them, the contemporary theory believes that the

learner's mind possesses meaning-making and pattern-seeking functions (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 1995). This supports instructional approaches that actively engage learners in the learning/thinking process. Focusing on prior knowledge can increase learners' familiarity with the new materials, and eventually enhances their level of understanding. During the learning process, learners should have ample opportunities to talk about the topic, seek meaning through various means such as pictures, manipulatives and props, and produce output. The combination of interactive techniques enables learners to internalize the concept, and practice using the vocabulary before putting their thoughts in writing.

The teaching-learning cycle.

Hammond, Burns, Joyce, Brosnan, and Gerot (1992) propose an instruction model called the Teaching-Learning Cycle. This model consists of four stages. The first stage is "Building knowledge of the field." Its objective is to prepare learners for the new learning. It includes sharing prior experiences, developing vocabulary, and practicing grammatical patterns that are relevant to the topic. Learners experience a variety of meaning-making strategies to understand the content of the study. Examples include the use of visuals (i.e. photographs, video, charts, diagrams), hands-on activities (i.e. skit, role play), communicative activities (i.e. sharing, discussing, or arguing about the topic), a wide range of verbal and written genres, and reading strategies (i.e. predicting, skimming, scanning). This is an important stage in building the learners' foundation in learning the materials.

The second stage is "Modeling the genre under focus," which is characterized by the teacher's modeling of language structures such as set phrases, vocabulary and

dialogues. Schematic structures are outlined. Learners can observe the genres that are being used, identify the purposes of the genres, and analyze their schematic structure.

The third stage is "Joint construction of the genre." This signifies the transition from oral to written language. Teachers and students co-create a text which provides the opportunities for learners to learn the structure of genres, and then the grammatical patterns. This stage allows the negotiation of meaning between teachers and students or between students. It also has the function of further reinforcing the concept and vocabulary.

The fourth and the last stage is "Independent construction of the genre." Learners work on an authentic task to apply what they have learned. They incorporate their knowledge of content, genres, and grammatical patterns into their language product. This is also the stage where the editing process takes places. Teachers can focus lessons on grammatical features such as spelling, punctuation, and tenses

The Teaching-Learning Cycle is an example of an instructional model that allows students to learn rules in a meaningful context. Its educational implication supports the theoretical framework of the integrative approach. Teachers do not have to follow this cycle in a linear fashion. A classroom activity can incorporate the language objectives of two or three different stages. This model allows teaching in a variety of genres such as invitation, persuasion, complaint, narrative, argumentation, book reports, letter, movie review, skit, recipe, autobiography, inquiry, etc. It also allows the second language learners to develop skills in the area of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

The integrative approach presents information from whole to part in a circular manner. Learners have the opportunities to be re-exposed to the same skills throughout the interactive teaching/learning process. The focus is on studying the materials in depth, rather than on wide coverage.

Summary

This paper outlines the theoretical framework of the integrative approach, which stresses the importance of meaning for learning a second language. The focus of instruction is on communicating the content; specific language skills are learned in meaningful contexts. Learners' comprehension is through verbal discussion of the topic, engaging in authentic tasks, activating prior knowledge, and gathering clues from the learning environment. The learning process is characterized by ample verbal and written expression of language.

At the beginning stage of language instruction, teachers focus on meaningful context instead of emphasizing grammar and form. Then it proceeds to the teachers' modeling of the text, and the joint effort of teachers and students to create a text. Finally, learners are given the opportunity to apply what they have learned. The teaching-learning cycle illustrates the instructional sequence of the integrative approach.

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